

GENERAL McCLELLAN'S CHANGE OF BASE.

GENERALS McCLELLAN and Fitz John Porter have recently published articles in the "Century Magazine," on the campaign against Richmond in 1862, explaining to some extent the causes of that failure to capture the capital of the Confederacy. These papers are written from the same point of view, and are clearly intended to fasten upon Lincoln and Stanton the chief responsibility of the failure. They write in the same spirit, they use the same materials, and they work to a common end—thus showing a mutual understanding, as was to have been expected from their intimacy during the war.

Their efforts to make history have been widely read ; and owing to the grave accusations made against the most beloved of our Presidents, they should be carefully considered and critically analyzed. If they have made statements not consistent with each other, and not confirmed by facts well established, the truth of history demands a refutation of their perversion of it. I propose to point out some of the errors into which the generals have fallen, and to note some of their inconsistencies.

It is charged that McClellan was forced to place and maintain his army in a dangerous position on the two banks of the Chickahominy, in consequence of a running promise of Lincoln to send the force of McDowell to his assistance by land ; that this promise was not kept ; that McDowell never came ; but that in consequence of the constant expectation of his coming a base of supplies had to be maintained on the Pamunkey, in order to feed the 40,000 men whenever they should appear, and that the right wing of the army was thereby made weak and invited attack from Lee.

General Porter says :

" The faulty location of the Union army was from the first realized by Gen. McClellan, and became daily an increasing cause of care and anxiety to him ;

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not the least disturbing element of which was the impossibility of quickly reinforcing his right wing or promptly withdrawing it to the south bank. That this dilemma was known to so intelligent a commander as Lee could not be doubted."

The error, then, was certainly known to General McClellan at the time it was committed, and Generals McClellan and Porter had no doubt that it was soon known to Lee. It appears by their representation to have been a great fault. The question is, whose was it? Having declared it a fault from the beginning, they then seek to convey the impression that the responsibility for it belonged to the authorities in Washington, and they try by insinuations and statements to demonstrate that the Pamunkey base was a necessity growing out of the promise to send McDowell with 40,000 more men, and hence that General McClellan was fatally cramped in his movements by the location of the base. They imply that had General McClellan not expected General McDowell he would not have held a position so illy chosen, or that he would have escaped from it before any trouble arose.

The reader may be surprised to learn that there was no connection whatever between McDowell's coming and McClellan's stay on the Chickahominy, but such is the fact. McClellan himself relates the circumstances which prove it. In his report to the War Department (printed in Vol. I., p. 542, "Moore's Rebellion Record"), McClellan says he was at first in favor of moving towards Richmond from Urbanna, but that circumstances made it inadvisable; that at a council of war, held at Fairfax, the corps commanders decided to move by the Yorktown route; that he agreed and sent word to Stanton, who replied that Lincoln made no objection. It further appears that Lincoln was rather opposed to the plan agreed upon at first, and only assented when he found it was the unanimous judgment of the high officers upon whom devolved the duty of endeavoring to take the rebel city.

This admission clearly relieves Lincoln and Stanton of the whole responsibility of selecting the line of operations, and from all that grew out of that selection which was not directly due to their arbitrary interference.

Now the Pamunkey as a base became a necessity of the route selected, and it was chosen before any question about McDowell had arisen. The first step in the plan of moving by the peninsula was to secure an immense flotilla of transports adapted to the naviga-

tion of the rivers, and they were loaded with supplies and ordered to that base preliminary to all else. Head-quarters were established on the Pamunkey at the earliest moment—16th May—and from that moment the supplies for the whole of McClellan's army had to be protected, whether McDowell came or came not. It was a necessity from the moment of McClellan's arrival, and there can be no dispute about it. On May 20, of his own accord, wholly uninfluenced from Washington, McClellan divided his army and put the strongest half across the Chickahominy. The dispatches of that period make no reference to the promise of McDowell's coming as a reason for dividing the army, nor do they show any doubt of the propriety of the movement or of the entire safety of the plan. McClellan complained of not having troops enough, and of other things, but there is no word intimating that he is held in his dangerous position by McDowell's non-appearance. Most of the time he seemed to be in a cheerful frame of mind, and held out the idea of soon being within shelling distance of the rebel capital.

The one anxious man was Abraham Lincoln. On June 3 the President telegraphed :

"With the continuous rains I am *very anxious* about the Chickahominy—so close in your rear and crossing your line of communication. Please look to it.

"A. LINCOLN."

McClellan answered on the same day :

"As the Chickahominy has been almost the only obstacle in my way for several days, your Excellency may rest assured it has not been overlooked."

This was a diplomatic way of saying to the President : "Do you regard me as a military fool, not knowing enough to look out for my base?" If McClellan had been held there at the time by Mr. Lincoln, the opportunity was now given by the telegram for him to explain the danger, and he could scarcely have refrained from telling him all about it, instead of quieting him with the assurance that the communications had been looked after. The answer exhibited no sign of apprehension, and no anxiety because of the division of the army. That he felt none is evident ; because three days later he sent word to Stanton (dispatch June 7) :

"I shall be in perfect readiness to move forward and take Richmond the moment McCall reaches me, and the ground will admit the passage of artillery."

How could McClellan have felt able to take Richmond if, at

this time, he and Fitz John Porter were trembling with fear lest Lee or Johnston should pounce upon and take *them*? He was not despondent at all. On May 26 he telegraphed that he did not think the defenses of Richmond were formidable, and he hoped soon to be in shelling distance; and yet his army was divided, and had been divided for nearly a week. Besides, on this very 26th of May, when he was so hopeful, he detached Fitz John Porter with a large force from the right wing—the very wing which was so weak as to invite an attack from Lee—sent him away to Hanover Court House, and two days later went there himself in person. That was an unaccountable proceeding on the supposition that they were aware that Lee knew the perilous condition of the Union army and was ready to strike the weak right wing. If there were a necessity for sending off Porter, certainly there was none for McClellan's being away at so critical a moment. What would have become of the army had Lee swooped down when the two chief officers were absent?

The troops crossed the Chickahominy May 20, and for thirty-five days the army was divided by the river, and of course in peril. Porter says that from the first the fault was realized. Then he goes on to say that, on the morning of June 26, he

“Was informed of a large increase of forces opposite Reynolds, and before noon the Confederates gave evidence of an intention to cross the river at Meadow Bridge and Mechanicsville. . . . Thus the attitude of the two armies toward each other was changed. Yesterday McClellan was rejoicing at the success of his advance towards Richmond.”

The statement now made in this last quotation is a flat contradiction of the averment that the failure to take Richmond was due to the division of the army, about which they had been so anxious. They were happy until the morning of June 25, when the rebels confronted Reynolds. They thought everything had gone well, and rejoiced as successful generals should rejoice. They were in blissful ignorance that Lincoln had been holding them for a month in mortal peril astride the river by an unfulfilled promise to send McDowell. They had not discovered they were staying there to guard provisions for McDowell's soldiers to eat when they should come. They thought themselves on the aggressive, and “yesterday,” the 25th, McClellan was rejoicing!

It is a remarkable circumstance connected with the ingenious theory put forth by these generals as an excuse for their failure,

that the change in their frame of mind occurred on the 26th of June; because, as luck would have it, the bridges were all completed and communications were perfected on the day before. On the 25th of June the inability to reinforce the right wing, and the impossibility of withdrawing it promptly to the south side of the river, ceased. The danger which had caused their daily increasing anxiety ended with the completion of the bridges, and the invitation they had been holding out to Lee to come on while it was impossible to strengthen the right wing was withdrawn; yet now sadness took the place of joy. All was changed! In a single night, after their danger growing out of inability to concentrate had disappeared, they suddenly discover the peril of waiting for McDowell, and gloom settles over the tents of head-quarters!

But the generals furnish another piece of testimony which also overthrows their new theory. They were to move as soon as McCall arrived and the roads were ready for artillery. McCall arrived on June 12, and had been with McClellan a fortnight. Lee first found the roads passable, and, as it appears, concentrated his army; and on the 26th of June attempted to crush the right wing, as McClellan had from the first supposed he would try to do. Porter calls for help, and what does McClellan say? Does he tell him that Lincoln has so divided the army that he cannot assist? Not a bit of this nonsense. McClellan says that he has sent to Keyes and Sumner and Heintzleman and Franklin, but that none of them can spare any men. Why should Porter ask for men if none could cross to his support? Why should McClellan ask his corps commanders how many they could spare if none could cross the river? * It is not thus that great generals act.

No; McClellan did not fail to concentrate his army because Mr. Lincoln had prevented such action, but because he was carrying out a plan of campaign of his own choosing, which necessitated a base on the Pamunkey and a division of the army at the river. He thought that that route, on the whole, was the best way to approach Richmond, and therefore he took the chances, whatever they were, and accepted the necessity of maintaining and defending his supplies.

A curious feature of this case is the strenuous insistence by McClellan and Porter of the binding obligation upon them of the or-

* See Vol. I., page 585, "Moore's Reb. Rec."

der given by Stanton to McDowell to join McClellan. McClellan says that as the order had not been revoked—only suspended—he could not abandon the Chickahominy, because he was looking for the coming of McDowell. But he had already shown that he could not get away because his bridges were not finished till the 25th, and he only confutes himself by charging his stay upon the President when the other reason was so much more conclusive and indisputable.

Porter undertakes to fortify McClellan (page 310 of "Century") by saying that the assurances of McDowell's coming were kept up as late as June 26. Yet he knew that on the 25th McClellan had decided to change his base; that on the 24th of May, a month previous, Lincoln had sent word that McDowell was to go to the aid of Banks; and that McClellan had replied on the same day that he would get along without him. From that moment McClellan had known that McDowell was not to go to him, and there was no intimation that he would go from that day on, until McClellan decided to move on the James. Having sent word to Lincoln, May 24, that he would do without McDowell, it is monstrously absurd to pretend that he must hang upon the river in chronic peril waiting for him to come; and especially after Mr. Lincoln had sent him the memorable dispatch of May 23, in which he said: "I think the time is near when you must either attack Richmond or give up the job." This dispatch, coming the day after the announcement that McDowell had been sent to Banks, could not by any twisting be construed as requiring the army to remain where it was in order to feed or receive McDowell, and showed that both generals knew they were expected to get away from the river the moment the roads were in condition.

The fallacy of this theory, that they were held to the river by expectations of the coming of McDowell, is queerly exposed by General Porter himself. On page 311 of June "Century" he says: "In the middle of June General McClellan intrusted to me the management of affairs on the north bank of the Chickahominy, and confided to me his plans, as well as his hopes and apprehensions. His plans embraced defensive arrangements against an attack from Richmond upon our weak right flank. We did not fear the results of such an attack if made by the forces from Richmond alone; but if, in addition, we were to be attacked by Jackson's forces, suspicions of whose approach were already aroused, we felt

that we should be in danger. But as Jackson had thus far prevented McDowell from joining us, *we trusted that McDowell, Banks, and Fremont would be able to prevent him from joining Lee, or, at least, would give timely warning of his escape from their front, and follow close upon his heels.*"

Being in front of McDowell of course placed Jackson between McDowell and Porter. This was the fact; and the above statement proves that Porter and McClellan were aware of it in the middle of June. They knew Jackson was not that kind of a commander who would allow the positions to be reversed, and they could not have had the faintest shadow of hope that McDowell could march around Jackson and get to them first, and especially when, at the very moment, their suspicions were aroused that Jackson was on the way. It is absurd on the face of it; and in penning the paragraph the general for the moment quite forgot how desperately they were clinging to the river in expectation of McDowell's joining them.

Porter says: "Yesterday (25th June) McClellan was rejoicing over the success of his advance towards Richmond. He was still assured of McDowell's junction. To-day all the united available forces in Virginia were to be thrown upon his right flank, which was not in a convenient position to be supported." In this statement Porter is still using the expectation of McDowell's coming, which he has shown did not exist after the middle of June, and he is still holding on to the theory that the right wing could not be supported or withdrawn in spite of the circumstance that General McClellan had completed the bridges the day before, that is on the 25th, and that he had confided to Porter his intention to transfer his whole force to the south bank in case events should justify it. Now if Porter's 27,000 men could conveniently be taken to the south bank of the river, it is nonsense to say that the river was any obstacle *then* to the sending of aid to Porter on the north bank. General Porter is here in a dilemma. He could not say that the reason for his not being supported was the presence of the rebel army in front of McClellan, because he is showing that his own peril is due to the concentration of the whole rebel army in front of himself; and to make that assertion good he gives McClellan away entirely, for McClellan had reported the reason for not aiding Porter to be the impossibility of sparing the men. To cover the great discrepancy Porter falls back on the exploded theory that the river

could not be crossed, and that President Lincoln was to blame for not sending McDowell.

Several things are therefore made certain, namely :

1. That the plan of moving on Richmond was adopted by McClellan, and that Lincoln was not responsible for it.

2. That the plan as adopted provided a base on the Pamunkey.

3. That the supplies being sent to the base must be protected as a military necessity, without regard to the sending or withholding of McDowell.

4. That the crossing of a part of his army to the south bank of the Chickahominy was the act of McClellan alone, and that Lincoln and Stanton were not responsible for it.

5. That McClellan at the time gave as the reason for remaining in his position the impossibility of moving before the bridges were completed and the roads in condition to pass artillery.

6. That the theory of being compelled to protect the supplies on the Pamunkey in order to meet the conditions of an expected arrival of McDowell is an erroneous theory, there having been no such expectation during the most of the time claimed to have been covered by this season of non-action.

Why this untenable theory should have been set up is not yet made clear. It must be left to further study, and perhaps to further explanations by the two generals. Many things concerning the campaign remain mysteries. The army was divided by the river from May 20 to June 27. The flood prevented the building of bridges to unite it (if the dispatches of McClellan told the truth), but the disclosures now made in the "Century" articles necessarily create great doubt whether those dispatches were true. Why should we be asked to believe the failure came from an attempt to protect supplies for McDowell, when they knew that general could not come? Why should we be asked to believe that McClellan stayed on the Chickahominy for that reason, when it was not possible for him to get away because of the rains and the destruction of the bridges?

Some other things, also, need to be accounted for. McClellan had been in front of Richmond for a month, and holding out a reasonable promise of being able to take it. Lincoln urged an advance while Jackson was in the Valley. According to Porter they did not fear Lee alone, but they did fear him united with Jackson.

They learn enough in the middle of June to excite suspicion that Jackson is coming, but yet they seem to have made no extra effort to get to Richmond before him. They must have known that if he had started on the 15th he would join Lee before the 24th. Yet McClellan makes his arrangement to move on the 26th. On the night of the 24th of June definite information arrives that Jackson is within two days' march of a junction. On the 25th McClellan is particularly hilarious. There can be no mistake about the date, because it was the day before the change to sadness, which was the day when Porter was attacked in force. One would naturally suppose that the knowledge of Jackson's approach received on the 24th would have made McClellan sad on the 25th; but it seems not to have done so, or else it took a whole day to work him up to a realization of the danger.

On the 25th McClellan telegraphed Stanton: "I incline to think Jackson will attack my right and rear." That was a strange telegram under the circumstances. What inclined him to think so? According to Porter they had been daily anxious about the condition. The right was weak and the base exposed. They were aware that Lee knew it, and, as a good general, that he would attack there if he made an attack at all. It was not likely he would make an attack in any weak fashion, and obviously McClellan must be prepared for the worst that Lee could do. Why does he say "incline to think" when he well knows Lee is going to do the proper thing for him to do? Is it to leave an impression that in case of disaster he will be able to plead there was such doubt of Lee's intentions he dared not strengthen Porter? But however this may be, he did not materially strengthen Porter and he did not withdraw him. He sent word to Stanton that the rebel army was reported at 200,000 men, and then he allowed Porter to meet as much of that force as Lee might see fit to precipitate upon him, and Porter had but 27,000 men! He conceived the extraordinary idea that if Porter's little band could repel the assault of what Porter called the combined rebel army, the left wing would be able to go at once into Richmond; and he resolved to stake the whole army on that notion, and, if Porter should be beaten, to burn up the enormous stores on the north of the river and fly in haste to Harrison's Landing on the James. Porter *was* beaten, and then McClellan discovered a way to get him across the river—the very thing which, for a month, he and Porter had seen *must* be done if

Lee did what they supposed he would do—struck the weak right wing with an overwhelming force.

Rebel General D. H. Hill now shows it would have been easy for McClellan to have captured Richmond while Lee was fighting Porter, but McClellan must be judged by what he knew at the time and not by what Hill knew. McClellan knew that an army divided by a river was in a bad position, and he knew that Lee at Gaines's Mill had placed the strongest portion of his army against the weakest portion of the Union army, and that the river was in the rear. This gave *him* the chance which Lee had all the time possessed down to June 26—the chance of throwing the strong wing against the weak one of the enemy; and yet he could not do what he gave Lee the credit of seeing was the right thing to do, and what he expected would be done—what indeed he saw was being done. Lee fought the McClellan weak wing; McClellan left Lee's weak unmolested.

Reference has been made to the persistency of the two generals in claiming they were bound to treat a suspended order as still in force because it had not been revoked in terms. This amazing loyalty to orders does not appear to have been a striking characteristic of these commanders on any other occasion; and when contrasted with the claims set up by them of the right and the duty of Porter to disobey the peremptory orders of Pope, because he imagined that Pope at the time of giving the orders did not understand the situation, makes it difficult to imagine that we are dealing with the same officers. They would have us think, in the one case, that an order which had been suspended for a month, and practically abandoned by sending McDowell where he could not come to them, must be treated as still in force, although at the peril of losing the campaign, while, in the other case, a positive and recent order was to be treated with direct contempt.

In an article by General Franklin in the July "Century," that officer says the Prince de Joinville requested him to tell General McClellan to concentrate his army at the junction of the two roads leading to Malvern Hill, to make a stand, and the next day he would be in Richmond. As Joinville was a man of ability, with a military education, and had been in the battle of Gaines's Mill on the staff of Porter, he was well able to judge in regard to the relative strength and fighting resources of the two armies. From what has been revealed since by Hill, there can be no question that Joinville was

right. Franklin did not tell McClellan, for two or three reasons, among them, and chief among them, because he knew McClellan had no intention to assume the aggressive, and was scrabbling toward the James with all his might.

There had been fighting every day since June 25, and General McClellan stated that he won every battle but the single one of Gaines's Mill. And yet he fled from every field ! This singular conduct has not been explained on military principles. The presence of the Chickahominy no longer accounts for the situation, for that difficulty has been surmounted. The defense of the supplies on the Pamunkey has been abandoned. The weak right wing is no longer specially exposed. The ability to concentrate is recognized by the Frenchman, and has been demonstrated by Lee, whose forces, farther away and wider apart, *have* concentrated in spite of the river and the destruction of the bridges. But the victorious Union general concludes to escape the defeated foe and rest his laurels on the achievement of having saved his army !

